

A day in the life of ...

Like to have a conversation with you today.

Hope you will hear something that prompts a question about why I do what I do.

So, pick a day, any day and something, somewhere is going on that will affect you.

As you think about that, let me tell you about a day of mine in June 2005.

Interviewed with Governor, whom I've known a long time

Agreed that as communications director much of my time best spent looking ahead

Would spend the rest of the summer and fall thinking about what we'd do in the first part of 2006.

Then Katrina, the worst natural disaster in American history, hit on August 29, 2005

The world changed.

All of a sudden we were flying in National Guard helicopters, riding with first responders, doing mega-media at every level, frantically doing crisis communications that went far beyond what we think of as typical public relations

The time for thinking was over. The time for action was at hand.

We're still at it.

Though other issues arise Katrina still on everyone's mind

Recovery, rebuilding, renewal. Building a Mississippi that is better than ever. The job will continue for a long time.

A typical day? I don't have typical days.

Once visited a tire plant where one employee's job was to spread adhesive on two pieces of rubber as they came down a conveyor belt.

I couldn't do that. Monotony. Boring.

I'm a journalism major because I like the action of covering a story, writing it, watching it get set to the page and then watching the press as thousands of copies rolls out to waiting delivery people.

Especially the daily news business where you don't have to wait long to see the results of your work.

Live TV and radio are even more immediate ... people are watching and listening as you report.

Taped stuff is easy, with editing and such.

I can't get away from that daily news mentality ... that sense of urgency that some things have to get done right now.

In thinking about what I might say to you today, I wanted to draw some distinctions between journalism and public relations.

Maybe some things Robin has already told you.

Maybe some other things from my own experience.

As a cub reporter at the Sun-Herald on the Mississippi Coast in the day before any of you were born, I was assigned to cover a U.S. Senator named Jim Eastland who was coming to go fishing with the Secretary of Agriculture, whose name was Earl Butts.

I think they both liked a sip of Scotch now and then.

A Sun-Herald photographer and I met them at the dock when their boat returned.

It was the height of something called “Watergate,” and Sen. Eastland was chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee and one of the highest ranking senators.

The President then was a guy named Nixon, of whom you may have heard. Eastland’s committee had a minor role in investigating “Watergate.”

Now, you should know that in journalism there are a lot of verbal niches in which some people like to hide.

I like that imagery so I’ll say it again: Verbal niches in which some people like to hide.

I’ll give you two examples:

When you’re interviewing someone and they tell you something that’s “off the record,” it means they’ve given you information you can’t use in the paper.

When you’re asking someone for a quote and they say, “No comment,” it means they’ve given you no information and you can use what they said in the paper.

Neither one are very helpful to a reporter trying to do his job, and normally you’d just get one or the other.

But when I asked Senator Eastland for his comments on Watergate, he replied that the leadership of the Senate had decided to make no comment on Watergate, adding, and that’s off the record.

Think of this: I’m 21 years old, new at the job. Its late afternoon, I’m on a pier trying to talk to a very high-level public official who’s been out fishing and his response is not only “no comment,” but also “off the record.”

How would you write that story?

Short.

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Let’s spend a minute or two on how I spend my days.

I'm very fortunate in that I see or talk to the Governor every day and we talk about lots of things.

My office produces a daily news summary to let us keep up with what's in the media. Sometimes, I'll use something I read as a jumping off place for some kind of project.

I try to spend a little time on-line every day checking on special events or projects.

I'm involved with the Governor's scheduling. As you might imagine, he gets hundreds of requests to speak or attend a variety of events all over the country.

We're adopted three general ground rules for scheduling requests:

The Nike rule: "Just do it."

The Nancy Reagan rule: "Just say no." (She once had an anti-drug campaign with the slogan, just say no.

The Rhett Butler rule: "Frankly, I don't give a damn."

We try to plan several weeks in advance on specific issues we want to talk about:

Civil justice reform, economic development, health care initiatives.

Next Wednesday, we'll do an education event focused on dropout prevention and jobs for Mississippi graduates; the week after that a summit on early childhood education. We'll talk about various programs that will help set the stage for the 2007 session of the Legislature.

I might write or edit a press release, or remarks or talking points for the Governor to use.

I will likely talk with several members of the media on whatever subject they find of interest.

I will likely talk to communications directors or executive directors in various state agencies that report to the Governor about what's going on in their worlds, like the Department of Corrections where an execution is scheduled next Wednesday, or on Oct. 30 when a workforce development event is scheduled.

This Governor is really interested in details and frequently tells program specialists things they didn't know about their own programs.

I consider it a compliment on those infrequent occasions when I can tell him something he doesn't already know.

I try to do message-audience analysis, what can we say and to whom for maximum affect and benefit.

During the day I'll talk to other staff members about what's going on in their specific areas of interest.

All in all, days are pretty lively.

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Now, what traits are best for public relations professionals:

Show an interest in your world. Be curious about how things work.

Be dependable and consistent. If you say you'll do it, do it.

Be open to many sources of information.

Good communications skills, and what do I mean by that: Language skills particularly spelling and word usage are important.

Ability to recognize opportunities.

Ability to build and maintain relationships because you never know when that cub reporter is going to be editor of the New York Times.

Know the media, which improves your ability to use specific to achieve desired results.

Don't burn bridges as you progress in your career.

Ask questions. It's how you learn.

Questions?